



Navigating Ethical Challenges

The Importance of Mentors for New Attorneys

By Liz Abdnour

New lawyers face all kinds of challenges in their first few years of practicing law. For me, one case during my first year of practice will always stand out.

I had been sworn into the Ohio bar for less than a year when I was assigned a high-stakes custody case. This case is notable as being one of the most stressful and ethically thorny cases of my career. Although I didn't realize it at first, I was in way over my head as a new attorney. Both parties were extremely invested in getting the outcome they wanted and would stop at nothing, it seemed, to achieve it.

As a legal aid attorney, I was handling the case on my own without co-counsel. I represented the mother in the case. Soon after I began representing her, the adverse party, who was a well-known local public figure, initiated a smear campaign against my client and me. First, he published a post on his widely read public blog falsely saying we had stolen court records. Then he published on his blog my home address and Social Security number as well as contact information for some of my legal aid colleagues and several close friends of my client. He filed a motion for contempt against me and threatened to file grievances against me with the Supreme Court of Ohio and the Cincinnati Bar Association.

I did not have the legal knowledge or self-confidence that I do now. I became so overwhelmed with anxiety that I was unable to continue competently representing the client. Luckily, the case was transferred to another attorney in my office. However, I became physically ill from the stress and stayed in bed for three days as a result. I thought I was going to lose my license to practice law, which is terrifying for a new lawyer with six figures of law school debt.

In hindsight, I learned a lot from the experience. I discovered that dealing with pro se litigants can be a slippery slope. If an opposing attorney had behaved in a similar manner, I would have had recourse. I could have taken action through a grievance or asked the court for sanctions. However, courts give pro se litigants wider latitude than attorneys because of concerns regarding access to justice. My experience taught me that dealing with pro se parties requires you to communicate in a way that is respectful and limited in scope, but still advocates for your client. This is not something you learn in law school.

The experience taught me not to be intimidated by adverse parties or opposing counsel. I became immune to bullying, pressure, and threats. Now I view these actions as intimidation and gamesmanship, but I don't fear them. I learned to keep my head and focus on my clients'

cases without fear of personal attacks. I learned that people who resort to such attacks usually do so as a distraction technique because, in reality, they generally have limited legal grounds to support their positions.

However, the most valuable lesson I learned from that experience was the importance of having a strong network of mentors and supporters both inside and outside the office. I was new to Cincinnati at the time and did not know any experienced lawyers outside of my own office. If I had, I believe they would have advised me sooner that I was in over my head.

As a result of that experience, the professional development of new attorneys has become extremely important to me. There is no more valuable resource to a new attorney facing stress, anxiety, or depression than an experienced lawyer who can listen and give objective advice and support. There are numerous resources in the legal community to help new lawyers find such mentors. I strongly advise new lawyers I encounter to take advantage of mentoring programs, both formal and informal. I also suggest people become involved and stay involved in the State Bar.

The State Bar of Michigan Mentoring Center is available to all new attorneys. To sign up as either a mentor or a mentee, visit <http://mentorboard.careerwebsite.com/sbm>. You can also join one of the Inns of Court in your area, which is a great way to network with lawyers and judges across the spectrum of experiences. I have been a barrister member of the Potter A. Stewart American Inn of Court in Cincinnati and the Mid-Michigan American Inn of Court in Lansing and have made many valuable connections through both. You can learn more about Inns of Court at <http://home.innsofcourt.org>.

Helpful Resources for New Attorneys

American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division

http://www.americanbar.org/groups/young_lawyers.html

Inns of Court

<http://home.innsofcourt.org>

SBM Ethics Hotline

(877) 558-4760

<http://www.michbar.org/opinions/ethicsopinions#helpline>

SBM Mentoring Center

<http://mentorboard.jobtarget.com/sbm>

A number of state and federal bar associations and committees focus on different practice areas and demographics. Attending bar association and committee meetings and joining organizations' listservs is a great way to meet others who can help support you throughout your career. In particular, I recommend the American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division, which gives young lawyers the opportunity to network with each other and meet nationally recognized attorneys in any area of practice. Division membership is free for ABA members; information on reduced rates is available at http://www.americanbar.org/membership/dues_eligibility/dues_discounts_payment_plans.html. The annual ABA Young Lawyers Division fall conference will be held in Detroit in October 2016 and is a great way to get involved and meet people. For more information about the division, visit http://www.americanbar.org/groups/young_lawyers.html.

Another good resource for new lawyers is the SBM Ethics Hotline, which is free to all Michigan attorneys. The hotline provides information to attorneys with ethics questions related to their work. Staff attorneys can provide advisory opinions on prospective conduct of attorneys. Additional information is available at <http://www.michbar.org/opinions/ethicsopinions#helpline> or by calling (877) 558-4760. If you are calling about a specific client-related matter, be sure to provide scenarios in a hypothetical, anonymous format to protect client confidentiality.

Mentors can also come in unexpected forms. I have developed strong mentoring relationships with a judge, a more experienced former opposing counsel, and several courthouse staff members. The best way to develop relationships with others is to reach out to them, ask for help, and be genuine.

It is critical to your long-term success as a new attorney to build strong relationships with more experienced professionals in the legal community. I urge all new attorneys to use the resources available to them to find a network of experienced, trustworthy mentors to rely on when they face the inevitable challenges, stresses, and dilemmas that come with the practice of law. ■



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